

# THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE<sup>1</sup>

By WILLIAM C. G. JITRO

(From *The Little Review*)

THE low country of the lakes with its flowing blue waters, its sunken gray and yellow earth and low skies, is beautiful; yet there have been thrown down in it cities so mean, so cold, so dingy, and so ugly that in them any beautiful thing is marvelous. The eyes strain away out of the cities over the waters and the still, sandy marshes, or turn up into the fathomless heights of the sky; and again and again in springtime, when small clusters of fruit trees and rose vines bloom here and there in the smoke with robins singing in the new sticky foliage, one seeks such spectacles out to walk near them. As for the cities' polyglot people, they are so harsh, so cold and silent, and so monotonous both in appearance and in their fierce activity, that among them any one only beautiful or charming becomes precious; a thrilling deed, a noble character, a great love, a deathless faith, or even a passionate hatred, or profound despair is something to set apart, to cherish in the mind, to hoard and love.

For they dream, the people of those gray and far-off cities by the azure floods, as all must do or die; but their dreams are not good or sweet or high or noble.

Once it was evening in winter in a city and the great blue darkness had fallen upon the low plains, the waters, and the frozen marshes; the darkness had grown gray and misty; and after that, as usual within the city, it had become dead, cold, and dingy black. The long misty streets with their feeble pale-blue lamps were dingy; and though many hurrying people, rattling black gasoline motor vehi-

<sup>1</sup> Copyright, 1922, by Margaret C. Anderson.

Copyright, 1923, by William C. G. Jitro.

cles, and broken dirty tram-cars passed in them, yet they remained dreary. One of the half dozen very long streets, which lie across the others and meet in the lower center of the city like the spokes of a half-wheel, was dark when I walked into it. It had large furniture shops full of colored lamps; tobacco and shoe shops well lighted up; and Jews' shops with every sort of cheap glittering merchandise to catch the eyes of the crowd of stupid whites and negroes who occupied this quarter; yet it seemed bleak and dark. The people hurried along silently in the shadows; old snow lay frozen in the dim dirty corners; and the dust was thick. Over the roofs the sky seemed particularly black, foggy and cold.

It was night.

For a time there was no sound except those of the vehicles flying over the rough pavement, the pounding tram-cars that passed, and the shoes of the hurrying people; but at last, at intervals above the other sounds there became audible what seemed to be a voice raised in shouting or speaking; and on coming to a place where two mean dark side streets met I found on the pavement of one of them a short, plump, gentle but very earnest and prepossessing negro of forty who was urging upon passers the principles of Jesus' teaching. He used the inflection and diction of most negroes in this part of the world, but he was neatly dressed and wore a greatcoat, though his head was bare, for he had placed his round black hat against an iron hydrant for the reception of coins. Four or five men who had turned aside from the main street were listening to him; more, however, were going into the half-screened drinking places all about. Besides, the farther side of the street in which he stood contained a row of little dark wooden buildings that held negro brothels.

It was a dusty winter night.

"You men, naow," the negro was crying in a ringing, pleasing voice, "you got to be good! You got to do as God says! It ain't gwine do you no good to pray to God if you don't do as He says! Don't you go to fightin' and killin' and gamblin' and then pray to God. It ain't gwine do you no good! First you got to quit yo' fightin',

quit yo' killin', quit yo' drinkin', quit yo' gamblin', quit yo' swarin', quit yo' whore-mongerin: God does not wish you to do these things! Then you go to Him and pray! And he's gwine hear what you say!"

The utterance of these words with such singular force in that stirring melodious voice, and the face and form of this sturdy little man made lovely by joy, faith, an' good will, shone in that bleak cold street, it seemed to me, like a work of glittering gold and jewels amid gutter dust.

I drew nearer and listened to him say that he had come there because he had been bidden by God to go among men and preach the Word, not as preached in worldly churches but as the prophets of Israel and the Apostles preached it long ago. Men must be truthful, kindly, abstemious; then all would be well with them. They must understand one another, sympathize with one another, love one another. That was the Word. When all did so, then God's kingdom would have come on earth. Meantime the few who knew the truth and strove to live by it would, even though they were lonely and cast out, become happy, strong and courageous. Theirs would be a life unattainable by the gross and careless, a life inconceivable by such, yet the life that all men really desired, the life that was man's heritage.

Aside, as it were, for the assurance of timid children, he illustrated some of the workings of God's plan. Once a man received God into his heart and was trying earnestly to live according to His will, God would not desert or neglect him either in this world or any other. He himself was but a humble servant bidden to teach and expound the Word. And since he strove to do this, even though he never succeeded as he wished to, yet God had blessed him forty years with health and strength and the means to live. "The servant am worthy of his hire," God had said, yet so merciful and kind was God that, "Jes' so long as you try the best you can, He'll stand by you. Money an' things is the least, but He'll see to them too. Ah don't have to worry. When Ah get out of money He send me means to get some. Ah don't owe nobody a cent tonight 'cept seventy-five cents fo' coal, and the man said the' wasn't no hurry fo' that; but Ah'm goin' to pay him tomorrow night.

And this week Ah was down to the Boahd of Public Works and they said they'd put me to work next Wednesday mornin' shovelin' up ashes in the alleys. Ah'm gwine be there. So I get on. Kase Ah'm tryin' to do as God said. He'll do jes' the same by you. If you wonder who I am to stand out here and tell you this, Ah'm Brothah Frank Burns, Servant of the Lord, come to preach the Word like ole Isaiah and Jeremiah and ole Jonah—an' like ole Peter an' Paul an' Silas. They said what Ah'm tellin' you naow! Kase that's God's Word that'll make you happy an' strong an' glad!"

Bright earnestness! Steadfast belief! But two grim city policemen, coming through the dark street where the brothels are, making their way swiftly in the gloom, hear the preacher's voice and raise their heads. They are not patrolling and have not their bludgeons, but one immediately gives the other a package he has been carrying and hurries across the street behind the speaker: a short, burly man, pink-faced and contemptuous, active and strong, with the bold insolence and cruelty of the police. The buttons and silver shield glitter on the breast of his clean blue greatcoat; the forepiece and shield shine on his heavy cap. Without a word he takes the speaker from behind by arm and neck, jerks him violently backward, choking him, and all but throws him to the pavement. "*Here! Here! Here!*" he cries. "What are *you* doing?"

Startled, the negro tries to keep his feet and twist his head so as to see his assailant. He strives manfully to explain.

"Where's your *permit*?" asks the policeman.

"Judge tole me Ah didn't need to have no *permit*—"

"Git to hell out of here!"

The negro is thrown forward almost to his knees and flung about. Very firmly he declares: "Ah've come here to speak the Word of the Lord like the old prophets in de Bahble. Folks must know this. Judge he tole me—"

At that the policeman fiercely tightens his hold, strikes him on the head with his fist, and hurls him to his knees. The second officer, a taller man, runs in. And the eager crowd that has gathered in the dark during these few

minutes of parley closes about to see. Again and again the negro is thrown down, struck, and dragged in the dust. He continues to gasp out his purpose. The dark cold street resounds with the noise of the blows, the scuffle, the negro's voice, and the feet of newcomers running up to see. At length, tossing along in the dark amid the crowd, the preacher is swept round a corner and pushed roughly past a dark little medical school, a cross street, and a long hospital with a dimly lighted colored statue of the Virgin in a front gable. Over the way are a dark cold little park with bare trees and a waterless basin, and beyond this some old public buildings. The negro's once neat clothes are twisted, half pulled from him, and covered with dust and mud, the hand of the policeman chokes him, but he continues to declare his purpose. The policeman, gripping him behind, rushes him along; the other follows carrying the round black hat and half entreating, half commanding the curious crowd to keep off and go away. The captive is taken round another corner and in through the dark basement door of a public building. The second policeman follows and closes the door. Then all go away except me.

I wait for a time, and the tallest policeman comes out and goes off. Soon after the burly attacker comes with his parcel and hurries up the street as if to make up lost time. After an interval the little preacher comes himself, alone and somewhat put to rights; goes quietly back around the corner, past the hospital and medical school and the park and on toward the corner where he was taken. But he seems to consider his work for the night done, and does not stop. He picks his way across the street of business and starts off northward as if beginning a long journey. I follow him curiously for two kilometers or more, but at last, concluding from the way in which he looks about when he passes under the street lights that he suspects that he is being followed, I turn off and go my way.

Next night, however, he is at his corner again, with a large crowd about him this time, for it is the gay free night before the Sabbath when the people have their wages for the week. Crowds are entering and leaving the broth-

els; loud cheery talk sounds everywhere, in the dark and in the cold blue light of the street lamps; and coins fall steadily into the hat by the hydrant. A tall spectacled friend, well dressed in fur cap and greatcoat with fur collar, accompanies the preacher tonight and treats him disdainfully; but just as before, with the same bright earnestness, the little man tells simply of his "mission," of God's laws and God's promises, and urges obedience to God. Without dismay, even with some zest, he speaks of last night: "Let 'em come an' git me again;" he says, "Ah'll be right back. They'll have to carry me though," he adds quickly. "I ain't gwine to fight 'em. That's what makes all the trouble, men, folks always a-fightin'. You boys," he cries earnestly, "don't you ever go to fightin'; don't you ever go off to no war and kill folks. If they try to make you, don't you care. Let 'em do what they can, but don't you care. The Lord said, 'Don't do it!' He does not wish you to do it! An' God'll look after you. Jes' you obey Him an' don't you worry!"

Introducing his companion, he assures his audience that this is "a splendid speaker," and listens eagerly to the other's halting, practiced: "Ah didn't expect to be called on to speak yeah this evenin'"; and interpolates quick, bright "Amen"s, "Yes, He will"s, and "Bless his Name"s into the exhortation that follows.

That night they were not attacked or molested.

But at a gathering of negroes on a later night I see the same bright strange little man standing unnoticed by himself at one side of the hall, and I go to him and assure him of my sympathy and tell him that I was present the night he was attacked. He passes over that hastily; it was nothing; he has had many such experiences; but when I ask him about himself he answers my questions obligingly, though with some diffidence. He knows nothing of his parents except that before the emancipation one or both were slaves; he has been taught scarcely anything; and has done hard work all his life. In his youth he joined a church and began to preach, but having come soon afterward to see the quality of churches and to be aware of his "mission," he traveled "north" and began to go about

working and preaching. He belongs to no church and disapproves of all alike. He has no property, permitting himself nothing but poverty and labor. Already he is looked down upon as improvident by those who know him. His wife has left him, not relishing her lot with him, for they were forced always to lodge in the poorest parts of the towns they visited. The intolerance and hate of white Americans for negro people made their lives harder than they would otherwise have been. Single rooms near small independent "mission houses," when there was one that suited, were their temporary homes; and from one such the wife went at last to visit at the town of Nashville in the distant State of Tennessee, and she has not come back. Her intention to do so was vague at her departure. Her husband has suffered a great deal through her desertion and has humbly and pitifully begged her by letter to return, but he has borne her failure to do so and goes on with his work. He is not loved, nor even much liked by anyone, I find later; he and his preaching, his high standards, his belief, his self-reliance and fearlessness, even his good temper, seem disquieting to others, irritating, a bore, something to escape.

During that year he remained in the city by the floods preaching and working at hard manual labor.

But the next winter, well toward the end, there was an epidemic of pneumonia and my little apostle was stricken suddenly and removed to a cheerless public hospital. There, gasping and choking so horribly that it was almost impossible to watch him, he died the night of his arrival. Nothing but a rickety screen of wood and cloth separated him from a score of other sick men when he died. Next night, washed and dressed in his usual neat clothes, with white linen and a gay colored cravat, the beautiful plump little figure lay in a hideous black coffin with tawdry white lining in the little gloomy mission house that he had found somewhere off on the northern edge of the town. Two or three people watched perfunctorily by the body; but though it was almost spring and the day had been wet, the place grew cold as the night waned, and became almost intolerably dismal and horrible.

The next day, when he was buried, was just such another old winter day, really a wet spring day. The low dirty white sky was heavy with the breath of the lakes; the air was thick with rain; and the filthy snow melted in corners and mingled its muddy dirty water with that which dripped in showers from the soaked and swollen black roofs. The motor vehicles, tramcars and the thousands of feet splashed the water onto the morose people, the buildings, and the shop windows. The negro's wife, not much affected, arrived from Nashville in time to attend the service at the mission house and to go in the cortege to the cemetery.

I left the service early, and riding on various trams and walking part of the time, crossed the low flat scattered city to the great out-of-the-way cemetery off on the western edge where he was to be buried. This tract lay beyond a vast expanse of the dirty little wooden houses of the city, which stand wall to wall along endless monotonous streets; but it lies on the bank of a little winding stream that is tributary to the great one by which the city stands. High stone supports and black iron palings fence the burial place, which stretches away out of sight among poor streets, low flat fields, and woods. Large parts of its surface have been covered with turf or diversified by small artificial mounds and slopes; but it is flat still, and the turf is now gray and dead. The yellow sand of the lake country shows through in places; and the square stones, urns, painted iron benches, and unsubstantial looking tombs that stand in clusters, are tiny. In making the mounds the trunks of many of the trees were buried almost to the branches, and these trees look fat, stubby, and short-legged in the gray mist. A heavy odor of warm, salty grease hangs in the lower air, a suggestive stench from a factory for reducing fats somewhere in the neighborhood. There are winding macadam roads through the cemetery.

When I have waited a little while at a place which has recently been added for the graves of poor people, the great black motor coach, splashed with mud, appears suddenly out of the city and enters one of the small stone gateways at the southeastern corner. There is a stone lodge there, and a bell over the gates tolls briefly as the

coach comes in. Then the vehicle follows a road parallel to a lonely bare wet red-paved street outside, in which long dingy trolley cars pass at intervals; and comes quickly to where I am. The sand here is entirely bare; the few old forest trees are neglected; and the graves lie in long close rows. They have no stones, but there are dead rotten flowers on some of the newest, fluttering forlornly from cardboard frames wound with lead foil and adorned with letters of crinkly purple paper. Some graves have been covered with white cotton cloth fastened to the ground by pegs; but that is all. Ragged rotten brown leaves lie in the hollows of the sand, where brown weeds stand; and wet newspapers are blown about by the cold wind.

In this shabby somber place on the dun earth of the boundless lake country, beside the harsh ugly city in which he has been an unwelcome stranger, but under the great white sky, too, the body of the servant of God is to be laid.

The coach stops in the muddy road, and the escort, all negroes except the undertaker and his agile assistant, descend in the mist. Those who are to carry the coffin gather uncertainly, and with the assistance of the undertaker and his man take it down. Then an irregular procession is formed, the bearers take off their hats, and slowly and stumblingly all move off up the slope on a mat of tan jute with two red stripes, that has been laid on the mud, and make their way among the graves. Shabby, ordinary people in their greatcoats and hats of different dull colors, with their umbrellas and rubber storm shoes, no one of them is much moved as they creep with their dead man like tiny worms on the yellow sand beneath the sky. When the poor black coffin has been put down on the canvas bands of the wooden frame around the grave, all stand back quietly while something that I cannot hear at my distance is read or said. Some of the women sob out then. The coffin descends slowly from sight into the damp yellow sand.

Out at a distance over the swampy fields beyond the stream, large black crows flap noisily around a lone tree; from a tiny locomotive on railway trackage far away white

steam rises with a faint roar. The mist in the air is rapidly turning to falling rain.

After a short pause the party straggles back to the coach, some who have started first pausing to look at the other graves and the dead flowers. A few remain for a moment by the open grave looking down. But very soon all are again in their places and the coach is rolling away among the slopes. It passes out at the stone gate and back into the city. And then old German laborers, who have been waiting not far off, approach the grave rheumatically and set aside the few flowers that have been left on the pile of fresh sand, which is partly covered by a green waxed cloth and evergreen branches. They put on and screw down the lid of the new wooden overbox; earth is thrown in; and before the early gloomy rainy nightfall the grave of Brother Frank Burns, Servant of the Lord, is almost filled.

But I go from the place almost unmindful of the irony of what has happened, almost unmindful of the night and the mist and the vastness of the wet sky; so touching and agitating have been this fair bright vain dream which I have glimpsed, and this pure and simple heart which, dreaming, has been able to meet its destiny so calmly and so bravely, has been able so undeniably and so thoroughly to conquer life and to conquer death.